SLAVERY AND SECLUSION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: A FURTHER NOTE

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GINA Porter’s very interesting contribution to a previous issue of this Journal ‘A note on slavery, seclusion and agrarian change in northern Nigeria’, 1 discusses the relationship between historical perspective and contemporary development. Dr Porter explores three major points. First, was slavery widespread in pre-colonial Borno? Second, what is the reason for ‘the low incidence of rural wife-seclusion (kulle) in contemporary Borno’ (p. 488)? And thirdly, were population densities in Borno ‘considerably lower than in central Hausaland over a long period’ (p. 489)? Let me elaborate on these – at some length on the first, very briefly on the second and third.

The present debate about the extent of slavery in pre-colonial Borno began with an essay by Muhammad Nur Alkali, ‘Economic factors in the history of Borno under the Seifuwa’, published in 1983. 2 Here, Nur Alkali stated: ‘With regards to the peasantry the cultivation of the land was done almost entirely at the family level for this section of the society hardly possessed the ability to own slaves’ (p. 71). To this he added a footnote: ‘Ownership of slaves was the exclusive preserve of the ruling class’ (p. 76, n. 40).

At first glance, this seems a good starting point for discussion: a clear-cut statement: peasant families cultivate the land without slaves, these being owned exclusively by the ruling class. In fact, Nur Alkali’s proposition is not quite so straightforward. Three qualifications need to be borne in mind. First, he is talking about the Seifuwa or Sayfawa dynasty, extinguished in the mid-nineteenth century. Evidence adduced from the later nineteenth century, against Nur Alkali’s thesis, needs to consider the possibility of post-Seifuwa changes. Second, peasantry and ruling class do not exhaust the population of pre-colonial Borno, which (as ‘Economic factors’ makes clear) included many other groups, such as nomads, pastoralists, clerics, traders, craftsmen such as iron- and leather-workers; Nur Alkali does not explicitly state whether all these, like the peasantry, did not own slaves, or whether some are regarded as part of ‘the ruling class’. And third, Nur Alkali is himself reacting to another proposition, of H. R. Palmer, who said of the Seifuwa and their allies that they had grown rich by raiding and enslaving the helpless negro populations by which they were surrounded and had in 1808 been for three centuries living almost solely on the labour of thousands of slaves necessary to provide supplies for the men and beasts of an indolent aristocracy in an arid country. 3

2 In Yusufu Bala Usman and Muhammad Nur Alkali (eds.), Studies in the History of Pre-colonial Borno (Zaria, 1983), 57–77. This is a stimulating book, with many interesting ideas, and some valuable original source material.
This seems in essence not unlike Nur Alkali’s own ‘exclusively the ruling class’ theory, albeit gross and overblown. Yet Nur Alkali roundly rejects Palmer’s scenario, as irrelevant for pre-colonial Borno, though sound enough as an imaginary prototype for British imperial behaviour. In such a clash of views, as this between Palmer and Nur Alkali, modifications and exceptions, necessary for the fine-tuning of argument, sometimes get squeezed out.

In a review article of several books, including that in which ‘Economic factors’ appeared, I suggested that there is ‘just a hint of the rose-tinted spectacles’ in Nur Alkali’s restriction of Borno slave-ownership to ‘the ruling class’. I cited one or two details in a contrary sense from Gustav Nachtigal, a German traveller who spent nearly three years in the Borno region shortly after the disappearance of the last, by then largely figurehead, Seifuwa rulers. I added that I doubted whether things had been much different under the Seifuwa.

My objection to Nur Alkali’s view of the limited, upper-class nature of Borno slavery provided the initial impetus for Dr Porter’s ‘Note’. She is clearly rather attracted by the Nur Alkali hypothesis, but adds that my alternative view cannot be dismissed lightly.

Her highlighting of the issue sent me back to Nachtigal. The picture which I had obtained through earlier study, of a society shot through and through with slavery at every level, was I think fully re-confirmed. There are literally hundreds of relevant slavery references. Only some examples must suffice here.

The rulers certainly owned slaves on a large scale. When Lamino, perhaps the most powerful man in Borno apart from the head of state, Shaykh Umar, died on 4 February 1871, his estate was said to have included several thousand slaves. Nachtigal describes the dwellings of the great men, with outer courtyards accommodating male slaves, inner courtyards female

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4 Nachtigal arrived, from the north, on Lake Chad on 27 June 1870; he left Kuka, capital of Borno, travelling east towards the Nile, on 1 March 1873. The last Seifuwa claimant had been executed in 1846.

7 Porter, ‘Note’, 491.

8 Curiously, Dr Porter herself seems not to have marked and inwardly digested Nachtigal as perhaps she should: the ‘Note’ cites (though a typographical slip has crept in) the two references given in my review article, but adds only one, of somewhat oblique relevance, of her own, n. 16 on p. 490 – plus some references in n. 15, to translation inadequacies in P. A. Benton.

9 They are gathered in A. G. B. and H. J. Fisher, Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa (London, 1970). We missed one reference (III, 367) to the Fellata visitors who ‘supplied with butter those who possessed small children for purchasing it’, not recognizing at first reading that the children were being exchanged for the butter. The cattle nomads, who, if they did not already have some slaves, were thus joining the ranks of the slave-owners, seem unlikely to have been prominent among ‘the ruling class’.

10 II, 302. Shaykh Umar, at the end of 1870, fined the semi-dependent ruler of Zinder 1,500 slaves for untoward behaviour (II, 284 & n). In 1866, Gerhard Rohlfss had estimated the Shaykh’s personal slaves at around 4,000 (Quer durch Afrika [1874–5], II, 3, cit. Nachtigal, II, 248n.).
slaves. During the rainy season of 1870, ‘in many houses slaves by the
dozen lay stricken by the fever’. Slaves served their wealthy masters as
soldiers and as attendants for horses, as builders and cooks, as
weavers, as spinners and tailors, as fan-wavers, parasol-bearers, even
zoo-keepers. Slave women surrounded their overweight master, massaging
his unwieldy legs, cooling him with fans, indulging his taste for lascivious
chatter. Luxury slaves did nothing in particular, and did it, as Nachtigal
found to his cost, very well.

Slaves were prominent among the hangers-on at court, and they filled a
substantial number of the most prominent positions in administration,
government, and the military. Slaves in such cases were not only owned by
the ruling class: they were themselves part of it.

Most of this might be taken as merely confirming Nur Alkali’s emphasis
on the upper crust as the only slave-owners. However, while Nachtigal does
have a great deal to say about the upper crust, he offers significant evidence
also about a wider and more democratic distribution of slave-ownership.
A crucial Borno passage is this:

It can be understood that in small villages where every household is on its own, and
where still there is no beginning of a suitable division of labour to generate and
maintain markets, the time of the inhabitants is fully occupied, and that even less
well-to-do people cannot well dispense with the help of a few slaves. The domestic
animals in particular are entrusted to the male slaves, who have to drive them to
the pastures or cut fodder for them, while the female slaves help the mistress in all
domestic duties.

Here Nachtigal is talking about small villages, not towns. It seems very likely
that he is talking about relatively undeveloped, even by Borno standards,
small villages. And, within such villages, he is talking about the less well-to-do
people. If Nachtigal is right, then Nur Alkali and (insofar as she agrees with him) Dr Porter must both, in this particular, be wrong.

Nachtigal entered Borno at Ngigmi, on the northern shore of Lake Chad,
at the end of June 1870. He watched the villagers moving their huts further
from the lake shore, as the water level rose during the rainy season. He
noticed, close to each main hut, ‘in proportion to the importance of the
household, one or more smaller huts for women, children and slaves’. The
next night he spent in Kinjalia, meaning ‘slave village’, intermittently
inhabited by slaves of the Ngigmi people, extracting salt from wood ash.

11 I. 152, 163. Shaykh Umar, his officials and his slaves, occupied most of the eastern
half of Kuka (II. 120). 12 II. 271, 119. 13 II. 119, 124; III. 322 (Bagirmi), 455.
14 II. 124; III. 216–7. 15 II. 158. 16 II. 137, 341. 17 II. 159, 181n.; III. 377.
18 II. 150. 19 II. 141; III. 314, 317 (both Bagirmi). 20 III. 321 (Bagirmi).
21 II. 172. 22 II. 141; III. 42. 23 II. 113–4 & n., 166.
24 III. 253 (Logon), 314, 316 (both Bagirmi).
25 For example, II. 101, 144n., 240, 245, 247–8 & nn., 251–8, 265n.; III. 178n., 265, 330.
26 Dr Porter raises the interesting question: how far were nineteenth-century visitors,
Nachtigal among them, constrained by an urban bias, arising from the difficulty of
learning about rural society ‘from their capital city residences and their mainly urban elite
contacts’ (491). Nachtigal spent a considerable time, probably more than most other
travellers, outside cities, in his journeying in Borno and adjacent regions. Further, urban
bias, which does not influence the nineteenth-century reports, seems more likely (as I
think Dr Porter herself implies) to under- rather than to over-estimate the extent of
rural slavery.
27 III. 131–2. 28 II. 102. 29 II. 103 & n.
Returning to Borno at the end of September 1872, Nachtigal spent a night in the village of Hobbio, in ‘an excellent large hut, where to be sure we were housed after the manner of the Arabs together with slaves, cattle, horses and sheep’. Nachtigal seemed thus to be reminded, almost each time he entered Borno proper, of the omnipresence of slaves there.

Another indicator of the widespread deployment of slaves within Borno is the fact that they were so prominent among other items for sale in the market of Kuka, the capital. Nachtigal describes large covered stalls, in the south-east of the market, where slaves were displayed in long rows, with or without chains. Slaves were an important, perhaps the most important export from Borno: but, among the various valuable export items, such as ivory and ostrich feathers, only slaves came regularly on to the open market, suggesting, I think, that there was a general local demand. Nachtigal gives prices on the Kuka market: the lowest was four to five dollars for an old man, the highest 40–100 dollars for a concubine, or 50–80 dollars for a boy eunuch. Such prices would not put the cheapest slaves out of reach of people even of only moderate means. For four or five dollars one might buy a good cow (for milk or slaughter), a good donkey, a very poor horse, or a modest tobe. These were prices on the home market: at the other end, for example among the Bagirmi slave-raiders that Nachtigal accompanied in the field, older men dropped to two or three dollars, children between six and eight years of age to three-quarters of a dollar. On the way home from Bagirmi, under very different conditions, sick slaves were being sold for a modest amount of grain.

Purchase was not the only way of acquiring slaves. All the way back from the Bagirmi slave-raid to Borno, Nachtigal and his caravan lost slaves, who were stolen from the caravan or escaped of their own accord and were gratefully absorbed by the local community. ‘Twice Nachtigal had to leave behind a slave too ill to travel further, once fearing (unjustifiably, as it proved) lest the people to whom he entrusted the ill man might, in their poverty, take him for their own. Somewhat similarly, Nachtigal’s Arab hosts on the northern frontiers of Borno, the Awlad Sulayman, complained that slaves were being pillaged from them. All this presumably served a useful trickle-down purpose, distributing slaves more widely in the society; though there is at least one reference to the establishment benefiting, since

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30 III. 448; a neighbour of his here was a slave woman of a Kuka notable.
31 II. 215 & ff.; see also p. 222, for market controls. Slaves also attended the market in considerable numbers (II. 220–1), just as they were among the crowds thronging the dendoral or main square (II. 155); to be sure, some of these slaves must have belonged to the ruling class.
32 In ‘Sudanese and Saharan studies’, 390, I also queried Nur Alkali’s final conclusion, that ‘The issue of slave raids and slave trade…is peripheral to the study of the economic factor in the history of Borno under the Seifuwa’ (p. 74); but this issue does not form part of Dr Porter’s argument in the ‘Note’, and accordingly I do not myself pursue it further here.
33 II. 234.
34 II. 225–6 & nn.; eunuchs, however, scarcely ever came on to the open market (II. 217).
35 Good tobes cost 40–50 dollars (II. 183–4).
36 III. 363.
37 III. 429.
39 III. 288 & n., 439. This happened once on the outward journey, once on the return.
40 III. 26–7.
the Bagirmi ‘governor of the river’ had the right to all fugitive slaves not
reclaimed by their owners.41

From pilfering slaves to kidnapping free people is not a large step, nor
from kidnapping to small-scale local slave-raiding. The Budduma, the
principal people of Lake Chad, and very far indeed from ‘the ruling class’,
rather specialized in this. At the end of February 1872, Nachtigal visited
Ngornu, the second town of Borno, close to the lake, then rising.

The further the water penetrated, the more frequently the Budduma made their
disagreeable nocturnal visits; and sometimes even during the day slaves or women
working alone in the fields were seized by the pirates who suddenly burst forth
from the reeds and bushes on the shore, and were dragged to the islands of the
Chad.

The town itself was sometimes raided.42 Earlier, at the very end of 1870, a
substantial village of Shuwa Arabs, living near the lake,

was attacked, part of the male population massacred, and the remaining 142
persons, mostly women and children, dragged into slavery. During this year of
abundant water, many an innocent farm worker from the lakeside ended up as a
slave on the islands of the Budduma, with little prospect, despite the small
distance, of ever seeing his home again.43

Some of the slaves thus seized by the Budduma may have found their way
back into more central Borno circulation; there is a reference, for instance,
to the Budduma buying plank-built wooden canoes from riverain peoples,
for eight or nine slaves each.44

The boat purchases are a reminder that slaves circulated also as a form of
currency. Lamino, the foremost Borno official already mentioned, whose
estate included some thousands of slaves, was known for paying ‘cash in
silver or in slaves for what he needed’.45 I have already mentioned the
tribute, or fine, paid in slaves by Zinder to Borno.46 Slaves were one of the
items paid as taxes by some of the groups living within Borno, to the central
government.47

Slaves circulated also as gifts. King Ali of Wadai sent gifts of clothing,
horses and slaves, to the turbulent Awdal Sulayman, hoping to buy peace on
his western frontier.48 Nachtigal describes the open-handedness of Shaykh
Umar towards penurious visiting clerics:

A poor faqih, in filth and extreme poverty, is seen for weeks together making a daily
pilgrimage to the royal residence until he has won over one of the great men who
introduces him to the generous Shaykh. Soon after one meets him in a new Bornu
or Hausa dress, or with a burnus decorating his shoulders, and after some months
he is seen perhaps, on horseback, accompanied by some slaves, and without a trace
of the humility which seemed to characterize him only a short time before.49

Here, the acquisition of slaves is clearly a marker of upward social mobility.
Nachtigal himself received two boy slaves from the Shaykh,50 and two

41 III. 328. How such slaves came to his notice is not specified. 42 III. 218.
43 III. 115.
44 III. 114n. This reference is considerably later than Nachtigal's own time.
45 II. 139. 46 II. 284; see n. 10 above. 47 III. 177, 178. 48 II. 336. 49 II. 174.
50 III. 56–9.
women from the Bagirmi ruler.51 Slaves might figure in the exchange of gifts associated with marriage.52

Slave women, as concubines, were another important factor in the diffusion of slaves within Borno society. Nachtigal records how such young women
take over completely the place of a housewife, and are much more zealous than she is to gain and to maintain the goodwill of their master by their industry and amiability, so as not to pass from hand to hand. If also in cases where they gain too much influence over their master,53 they easily become arrogant, demanding and too fond of dress, still on the whole the costs of maintaining them, and thus too the housekeeping costs, are much smaller than for lawful wives. For men without means and people who are compelled to great journeys and long absences, they are a real blessing, for lawful wives are seldom inclined to leave their home and kinsfolk, and according to the religious law, they cannot even be compelled to do so.54

Nachtigal’s reference here to ‘men without means’ is directly relevant to our present purposes. Nachtigal elsewhere described one case in particular. Abd el-Ati was a wandering scholar, poor, without servants or supplies, half-blind and hard of hearing, who each spring joined the Awlad Sulayman on their travels northeast of Lake Chad, teaching their children, writing talismans and therapeutic texts for them, handling such correspondence as they had, and chanting prayers in the evening. Thus he earned some hundredweight of dates, and one or two camels, with which gains he returned to Kuka where ‘he lived frugally with a slave woman until the spring came round again’.55

And so on. Further examples of all the above headings might be multiplied, and further headings added. But enough has been said, I think, to demonstrate that, according to the evidence of Nachtigal, the best of the pre-colonial observers of Borno, while the ruling class were indeed the principal slave-owners in the country, nonetheless slave-ownership on a more modest scale was widespread throughout Borno society.

The divergence of opinion, about the extent of Borno slavery, between Professor Nur Alkali and myself, is clear, and Dr Porter is fully justified in taking this as the starting point for her ‘Note’. However, she finds my comments ‘clearly contrary to previous writing by other researchers on this issue’, and she links Louis Brenner in particular with Nur Alkali’s view of elite-only slave-trading and slave-owning;56 indeed, this becomes ‘the Alkali-Brenner thesis of slave ownership’.57 She quotes Brenner’s remark, that ‘very few slaves indeed passed into the hands of Bornu commoners’;58

51 III. 334–5, 348. These promptly escaped. Nachtigal (III. 364–5) had to fend off, again from the Bagirmi ruler, first ten elderly men and women slaves, then ten younger slaves (sedāsiyya, six spans high), next a wife of the king (she had been surprised in an indiscretion), and finally a recently captured girl of about 16. But Nachtigal was obviously a special case.
52 II. 275–6; see also III. 390, for non-Muslim societies south of Bagirmi.
53 See also II. 334, for an aged widower among the Awlad Sulayman, ‘completely under the thumb of a young slave girl, who looked after his simple housekeeping for him’.
54 II. 216–17, my italics; see also I. 95, II. 317, 320n. 55 II. 344–6.
56 Porter, ‘Note’, 487.
57 Ibid. 491.
but this seems to refer to such commoners as took part in large-scale Borno slave-raiding (and even in this more limited context it is, as I shall suggest in a moment, perhaps rather wide of the mark). At the same time, Dr Porter does accept Brenner’s suggestion that all village heads owned some slaves, since Brenner includes those village heads who were not even moderately wealthy, the definition of a slave-owning elite being expanded rather generously. Dr Porter does not mention Brenner’s further comment, on the same page, discussing a household system ‘repeated on every level of Bornu society’, that ‘the household of a peasant might consist of only a family and a slave or two if he were well-to-do’. This seems irreconcilable with Nur Alkali’s view, that peasants ‘hardly possessed the ability to own slaves’, such ownership being ‘the exclusive preserve of the ruling class’. Brenner’s scenario, with even the poorest village heads, even prosperous peasants, owning slaves, is much closer to the Fisher end of the spectrum, than to that of Nur Alkali.

Brenner’s comment, that ‘very few slaves indeed passed into the hands of Bornu commoners’, has already been cited. Dr Porter takes this in a rather general sense; but she adds, correctly, that it ‘seems to be based essentially on Barth’s reports of the slave raid which he accompanied in the early 1850s’, and on comments current in Borno in the late 1960s, ‘that the only booty which filtered down to the troops was “blind, lame or broken-horned cattle”’. Barth, in fact, gives us very little information about just how the slaves from this raid were distributed. There was a preliminary partition on 3 and 4 January 1852; many young children, and even infants, were separated from their mothers, a detail which rather suggests that prizes were being doled out piecemeal, to a considerable number of beneficiaries—or, more likely, that some of the slaves captured piecemeal by individual raiders were being creamed off for the central authorities. A second division of the spoils took place over a few days in mid-January. Barth says that the whole of the spoil was to be divided here, without explaining what this meant for spoil already distributed. The division had to take place in hostile country, for ‘if the people were allowed to regain their own territory with what they had taken in slaves and cattle, they would go to their own homes without contributing anything to the common share of the army’—a phrase which perhaps suggests that quite a lot of ‘the people’ had captured

61 Ibid. 76, n. 40. It is also difficult to square with Dr Porter’s suggestion that Brenner ‘seems to imply’ that ‘slaves were basically confined to the slave farms of the royal and noble classes in Borno’ (‘Note’, 489).
63 Barth, II. 386. Most full-grown men avoided capture; almost all those who were taken were slaughtered (ibid. II. 418).
64 Ibid. II. 418. Barth goes on here to describe an additional surreptitious raid, upon Borno’s own Musgu allies, yielding as ‘a sort of tribute’ 800 more slaves. The commander-in-chief claimed all these for himself, but it is not clear just how many he actually got, since some were rescued the following night, and also ‘about 200 of the oldest and most decrepit women’ were given back.
something. Barth estimated that the booty comprised some 10,000 head of cattle, and not fewer than 3,000 slaves, 'by far the largest proportion' aged women, or children under eight. The raiders themselves boasted of more than 10,000 slaves. The commander-in-chief received a third of the slaves. The raiding army may have numbered 13,000 or more men, figures which seem large, but which are partially confirmed by Nachtigal. Brenner makes the very reasonable point that chiefs and courtiers with the expedition would claim more slaves than their troops; however, considering the very disorganized pattern of operations, with raiders ransacking abandoned villages and the surrounding countryside for people who had failed to flee in time, it seems very likely that a considerable number of slaves passed individually into individual hands—and very unlikely that all these were subsequently pooled and re-divided.

Indeed, Brenner goes on at once, in 'Community', to cite rules from Zinder, according to which each raider might keep half the slaves he himself captured, rounded upwards if the total were uneven. Nachtigal reports a somewhat similar arrangement for Bagirmi, Borno's southern neighbour. Of slaves captured, one half belong to the sultan, one half to the actual captor, while animals and other objects belong entirely to the captor. Although, in the light of the scanty detail given by Barth, this cannot be more than a surmise, it seems reasonable to suppose that what was happening in the redistributions he speaks of was the sweeping up of the authorities' half of the slave booty. If the commander were collecting slaves for this purpose, and if most raiders had individually captured one, two or three slaves, with halves rounded upwards to the benefit of the captor, then the commander would end up with about one-third of the slaves, just as Barth reports.

Sometimes, Nachtigal adds, 'the sultan claims all the slaves captured in an expedition, but more frequently the members and leaders of the latter find means of delivering up to the sultan less than half'. All these distributive models, which seem to leave considerable scope for individual initiative even amongst the lowest ranks, have a somewhat abstract and theoretical flavour. Actual practice was bound to have been more rough-hewn. Nachtigal repeatedly describes raiders scattering in search of individual fugitives, and quarrelling furiously one with another over possession. Once, when the yield from a raid was insufficient to give everyone a share, another attack was arranged on the way home, so that no one need return empty-handed, though some would end up with only livestock or goods.

To be sure, Bagirmi, from which the above Nachtigal examples of raiding are drawn, was not Borno: but Borno volunteers took part, almost without

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65 Barth, ii. 638–40. 66 III. 176. 67 Brenner, 'Community', 143.
68 'The proper distribution of booty was notoriously difficult, at every time and in every place throughout the political and military history of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. A concentrated study of this theme, and of the equally complex relationship between theory and practice in the rightful acquisition of booty in the first place, might prove a rewarding research field.
69 III. 346 n., 355 & n. Slightly different distribution rules applied to the Shuwa Arabs: 'For military enterprises, all Shuwa tribes have to render military service, and each man is entitled to half his booty if it consists of slaves, horses or cattle, and to the whole if it is a question of inanimate objects (clothing, ornaments, etc.); only the captured weapons fall exclusively to the [Borno] government' (III. 178).
70 III. 346 n.
71 III. 341 n., 343, 355, 357–8.
72 III. 347; see also III. 29.
exception securing a share of the human booty. And surely things were not very different in Borno raiding. My guess is that large-scale slave-raiding fed some slaves through into the captor society at every level represented in the ranks of the raiders, though of course not in equal shares. The smaller the raid, the more likely it was to become a serve-yourself affair: during the nine and a half months, beginning on 20 March 1871, which Nachtigal spent with the Awlad Sulayman, nomadic Arabs in the desert northeast of Lake Chad, he observed his hosts mount one minor slave raid after another, with almost no attention, it seems, to any rules of booty division. The slaves of the Awlad Sulayman also took part in these raids.

Let me turn now to the second main heading, the low incidence, particularly in comparison with Hausaland, of seclusion for wives in contemporary rural Borno. The discussion must be very brief, hardly more than an allusion to one or two possibilities for further study. Dr Porter suggests, as at least a tempting postulation, that the reason for less seclusion has been fewer slaves. With fewer slaves about in the first place, the association between agricultural work and slavery may not have been so close as in Hausaland. Free Borno women, therefore, and freed slaves, would have been able to participate in agricultural labour without social stigma. If, as I have suggested in the first and principal part of this paper, slavery in Borno was in fact widespread, and not at all the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy, Dr Porter’s argument on this point seems open to question.

Dr Porter mentions also that it is more difficult and expensive to sink wells in many parts of Borno, than in Hausaland; thus more women must go out to fetch water. And again, the development of groundnut production in Hausaland provided additional wealth to pay for alternative field labour, while at the same time creating more in-compound work, shelling the nuts.

These explanations do not leave much space for an independent religious input, amid the determining forces of demography, geography, and economics. Dr Porter does mention ‘cultural variation’ between the Hausa and the Kanuri, the principal people of Borno, but without elaboration. Let me suggest that another contributory factor may have been this: that the Sokoto caliphate in Hausaland was a reformed, theocratic state, based in substantial measure on popular assent. Controls, such as seclusion, were accepted, and acknowledged as proper, by many of the people subject to them, including many women.

There were such controls also in Borno, relating to the correct demeanour of women, but they seem to have been much more a matter of central...
imposition, lacking popular agreement. Dixon Denham, visiting Kuka, describes an attempt in 1823 by the ruler, Muhammad al-Kanami, to enforce greater seclusion: ‘an order was issued that no married woman, who had slaves, should ever be out of her house, or receive visitors [presumably male visitors] at home’. 80 But it does not seem that this rule was generally observed, particularly in the absence of the household head. 81 Discovered adultery was firmly punished: in one case, a slave, and the wife of a free man, were both hung. 82 In another instance, involving two free people, and made worse in that it occurred during Ramadan, the woman received 200 lashes, the man 400 (with a more substantial whip of hippopotamus hide); the man died; whether the women survived is not stated. 83 Such policies seem to have peaked when al-Kanami one day kept the town gates shut at daylight, and had sixty women of doubtful reputation rounded up. Four were flogged (two of them to death), and five were strangled under degrading circumstances. The reaction of the women of Kuka was clear: over a hundred families left the city to settle elsewhere; and at the Greater Festival following, when it was the custom ‘for the women to assemble, dressed in all their finery, in the street, before the doors of their huts, and scream a salutation’ to the ruler and chiefs passing in procession, the occasion this time was silent, the women flatly refusing to utter any welcome. 84 It is difficult to imagine such a gulf between central legal and religious policy on the one hand, and public opinion publicly expressed against the ruler on the other, occurring in Sokoto. 85

If we are to weigh up, in a balanced and reasonably complete fashion, the various factors determining the subsequent shape of a society, we need to include, alongside secular and environmental elements, also religious stand-

80 E. W. Bovill (ed.), Missions to the Niger (Cambridge, 1966), vol. 3 (part of The Bornu Mission: 1822–29), 385–6. The incident does at least hint at the presence of some Sokoto-style stigma against respectable women going out to work in the fields, or indeed going out at all.
81 See, for example, Denham’s friendly reception when visiting Maffatai, near Lake Chad, just a little later (Bovill [ed.] Missions, vol. 3, 459–60).
82 Ibid. iii. 388. Al-Kanami himself paid compensation to the slave-owner, since the wife had been the initiator of the offence.
83 Ibid. iii. 457–8.
84 Ibid. iii. 476–7.
85 I have cited only a few examples; many more might be gathered, and might illuminate the evolution of nineteenth-century Bornoan Islamic policy concerning women – a promising topic, perhaps, for a thesis or research project. Al-Kanami himself emerges as a rather enigmatic figure. The details given above suggest an austere, cruel man: but he vigorously rebutted the accusation, levelled against Borno by the Sokoto reformers, that a free woman praying with her head uncovered was a sign of unbelief (Thomas Hodgkin, Nigerian Perspectives: an Historical Anthology [Oxford, 1960], 200) and, in a quite extraordinarily romantic poem, he publicly rejoiced in the rescue of his favourite woman (presumably a slave concubine), who had apparently fallen into the hands of the Bagirmi, near neighbours and frequent enemies of Borno (ibid. 208–9). In Nachtigal’s time, there was still some evidence of seclusion: one of his closest associates vainly tried to fend off the unwelcome offer of a new wife by insisting ‘that he would by no means permit her the freedom customary in Kuka either to go out or to receive visits from the parental family’ (iii. 60) – but the reference to ‘the freedom customary in Kuka’ shows what the normal pattern was. There is little or no sign, in Nachtigal’s account, of brutality being used in the control of women (possible exceptions include ii. 448, iii. 390, but both these are hearsay, and remote from Borno). Shaykh Umar, son and successor of al-Kanami, was far too gentle a man.
ards, and the resonance which these call forth (or do not call forth, as the case may be) in the hearts and minds of local men and women.  

Let me now turn to the third point which I have singled out for discussion, from Dr Porter’s ‘Note’. This is her proposition that ‘population densities in Borno seem to have been considerably lower than in central Hausaland over a long period’.  

I do not wish to argue for or against such a statement, though I am confident that detailed analysis could be carried through, based on sources including Barth and Nachtigal. Such analysis would be extremely detailed and complex, and quite out of place here. What I would like to do, is to look for a moment at the way in which such population densities were established and maintained.

Dr Porter seems in some measure inclined to link population density with slavery. She sees, in central Hausaland and around each of the various capitals, central and provincial, of the Sokoto caliphate, ‘a substantial net immigration of labour … in the nineteenth century, associated with Fulani slave raiding and trading’. Lower densities of population in Borno are ‘related perhaps, in part, to the differential import of slaves in pre-colonial times’. Fulani expansion in Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe ‘cut off Borno from some of its major sources of slave supply, and hence of people’.

But, at the same time, all her specific examples of population mobility, whether inwards into Borno, or outwards, do not concern captives or slaves, but rather free people who are effectively voting with their feet. Dr Porter mentions ‘some of Borno’s most entrepreneurial groups’ who ‘seem to have moved across to Hausaland’. She also refers to the influx of Shuwa Arabs, followed by al-Kanami’s rise to power, and, later, of Sudanese under Rabih. And she quotes a letter of 30 January 1855, from Barth’s colleague Vogel, describing ‘countless emigrants [from Borno] to the Bauchi hills, carrying their little property’, and bearing ‘witness to the bad government’ in Borno.

In fact, as Brenner makes clear, Vogel’s floating voters are of even greater interest than this. ‘They were moving out early in 1855 to escape the heavy-handed rule of one man in particular, Laminu, who was acting as lieutenant

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86 Another instance of over-emphasis on demography, or any other such secular determinant, at the expense of religion, is to be seen in Dr Porter’s comment on the fact that sons of non-Kanuri slave women were considered (at least in theory) full members of Borno society. This, she says, ‘seems to suggest a perceived need for population expansion’: but it might equally well be the result of Islamic family law, where (again at least in theory) the children of a free Muslim father are equal, regardless of whether their mothers are free or slave. Dr Porter (490 and n. 17) cites R. Cohen, ‘Incorporation in Bornu’, in R. Cohen and J. Middleton (eds.), From Tribe to Nation in Africa (Scranton, 1970), 162.  87 Porter, ‘Note’, 489.  88 Ibid. 489.  89 Ibid. 489.  90 Ibid. 490.

91 Ibid. 90 n. 15; the passage is taken from P. A. Benton, The Languages and Peoples of Bornu (London, 1912, reprinted 1968), i. 279.

92 Brenner, Shehus, 81–2 and n. 37, 112–3. This argument needs some modification in detail. Al-Hajj Bashir had been killed in December 1853 (Barth, Travels, ii. 42), during a briefly successful coup d’état by a brother of the Bornu ruler. The usurper himself was soon overthrown and executed in December 1854 (iii. 154–5). The refugees whom Vogel met next month are likely to have been fleeing from civil war, and some indeed, as Vogel’s report suggests, from Laminu in particular; but Laminu could no longer have been operating on behalf of al-Hajj Bashir, dead for more than a year.
to the foremost official of the state, al-Hajj Bashir. When Nachtigal arrived, in 1870, al-Hajj Bashir was long dead, and Lamino had succeeded him. Now that Lamino was his own master (under the king), particularly in the Magumeri fief, Brenner observes that ‘matters were quite different, for the number of inhabitants there more than doubled as people resettled themselves in order to reside under his jurisdiction’. This is a particularly good illustration of people moving out, and in, in response to the vagaries of local government. Vagaries is perhaps a poorly chosen word: for a canny local government, by offering lower taxes, or more reliable justice, or security within and protection from without, or any other suitable inducement, might well succeed in recruiting exactly that element, people, which Dr Porter rightly suggests was in short supply (and not only, I suspect, in Borno).

This, the more or less voluntary mobility of population, is even more than slavery the key issue with respect to demographic resources. It was generally more efficient than slaving, less destructive, less risky, and delivering a higher quality product – one volunteer is worth ten pressed men. Of course, there were sometimes difficulties, particularly when the newcomers entered the body politic not as an invigorating blood transfusion, but like some unassimilable cancerous intrusion. The Fulani, for example, who caused Borno so much trouble throughout the nineteenth century, were (like the Shuwa) men on the move. And Rabih’s Sudanese immigrants overthrew the state entirely.

Nachtigal’s evidence, and much other evidence besides, if carefully studied and decoded, would be directly relevant for the study of population mobility outside the slaving context. He offers a great deal of detailed information about migration, early and late, which was often a form of building up demographic resources. He describes vividly the extraordinary diversity of people thronging Borno. On his first visit to the market of Kuka, the capital, he was struck chiefly by ‘the colourful medley of the representatives of the most diverse countries and tribes, among whom I sought in vain to see my way’. Nachtigal could himself recognize Kanembu and Shuwa. ‘The other people of Bornu, however, both men and women, and even the Kanuri themselves, appeared to include numerous heterogeneous elements, and…made no sort of uniform impression’.

Still more bewildering was the diversity of types among the foreigners and the slaves…While my escort Dunkas could recognize at a glance the tribe to which any individual belonged, even if he could not explain the differences precisely, I stared around in helpless curiosity, bewildered by the colourful picture…overwhelmed by manifold impressions.95

These are the raw materials, slaves among them, but not only slaves, from which Borno was building up and maintaining its population strength, and had been so doing for centuries.

Nachtigal has many references also to the emergence of new ‘tribes’ from the most heterogeneous elements, the absorption of such elements by established ‘tribes’, and to the amalgamation of ‘tribes’. Again, in all this slaves were an important strand, but they were certainly not the only strand, nor even, in very many cases, the predominant strand. It is difficult, reading Nachtigal, to accept that ‘tribes’, at least in his part of Africa, were in any

95 II. 220–1.
sense a creation of the European colonial period. What that period may, however, have done is to fix more firmly and permanently tribal dividing lines, which had previously often been surprisingly permeable.96

Dr Porter is surely correct in attaching great importance to the mobilizing of demographic resources. What is needed, I think, is rather less attention to the slave element in the analysis, and more to the evidence (some of which she herself cites) for a wide variety of other, non-slave, forms of population mobility.97

**SUMMARY**

The evidence supplied by Gustav Nachtigal and other sources on nineteenth-century Borno suggests, in contrast to the recent note of Gina Porter in this journal (xxx [1989], 487–91), that slavery was quite widespread and that the ownership of slaves extended far beyond the ruling and wealthy classes. The article also comments on the questions of wife-seclusion and population density.

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96 Alexander de Waal’s book, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984–1985* (Oxford, 1989), includes an interesting albeit brief discussion of the assimilation into the Fur people of immigrant strangers. He also remarks on the efforts of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, worried about ‘detribalization’, to prevent such ethnic change, with only limited success. What has been effective in blocking assimilation in more recent times appears to be the shortage of land for allocation to immigrants (pp. 47–9).